



The Guardian

The monthly newsletter of the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services

February, 2021

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) continues to provide benefits assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All 18 DVS certified Veterans Service Officers are working remotely to help veterans with filing VA claims or applying for state veterans benefits.

For phone assistance:
(505) 383-2400

For Email assistance:
nmdvs.info@state.nm.us

DVS website for more information:
www.nmdvs.org

Sonya L. Smith Confirmed by State Senate as New DVS Cabinet Secretary



Sonya L. Smith
DVS Cabinet Secretary

Sonya L. Smith was unanimously confirmed by the New Mexico Senate on February 17 as Secretary of the New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services (DVS).

The vote was 38-0, officially naming her as the fifth DVS secretary—and first African-American to serve as head of the agency. She had been serving on an interim basis since her nomination for the position by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham last October after the retirement of then-Secretary Judy Griego.

Secretary Smith comes to DVS from the New Mexico Department of Health as a special projects coordinator--specifically helping guide the efforts of the agency's COVID-19 testing team. Prior to that, she served as director of compliance at Southwest Care Center in Santa Fe, and before that, as director of primary care at the University of New Mexico Medical Group.

As a medic with the United States Air Force Reserve, Secretary Smith was activated to serve in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Upon receiving her honorable discharge, she earned a Bachelor's Degree in Health Services Management from Norfolk State University in her hometown of Norfolk, VA, and a Master's Degree in Health Care Compliance from Argosy University.

During the senate floor confirmation vote, senators from both sides of the aisle were quick to praise the nomination, citing Secretary-Designate Smith's strong background.

"I rise in strong support of Secretary-Designate Smith," said Senate Majority Floor Leader Peter Wirth (D-Santa Fe). "She has the skill-set that is really important for this job." She also said something that really resonates with me—that every day is veterans day to her. My door will always be open to her for any help."

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State Senators Greg Baca (D-Belen) (left photo) and Peter Wirth (D-Santa Fe)(right photo), who is also the Majority Floor Leader, were among senators who spoke in strong support of confirming Sonya L. Smith as DVS Secretary at her February 17 state senate confirmation.

“I stand here in strong support of Secretary Sonya Smith,” said Senate Minority Floor Leader and U.S. Navy veteran Greg Baca (R-Belen). “She has a kindness and the spirit to lead the department of veterans services. I’m happy to know that they will be under her guidance, and I look forward to working with her to serve our state’s veterans.”

During her preliminary virtual Senate Rules Confirmation hearing on February 12, Secretary Smith testified her three immediate goals as DVS secretary would be raising awareness for the prevention of veteran suicide, helping end veteran homelessness, and getting veterans registered for the COVID-19 vaccine.

“I’m proud to be the first African-American to lead the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services,” she testified via Zoom. “Never did I ever imagine that when I came to New Mexico seven years ago that I would have the opportunity to serve as secretary of this agency. But I think back to what my grandmother always told me when I was growing up: ‘What’s for you...is for you. And she was always right. I really look forward to helping our veterans and their families.’”

DVS to Host “Live” FB Discussion on Suicide Prevention

The Facebook logo, consisting of the word "facebook" in white lowercase letters on a blue rectangular background.

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) is hosting another “live” Facebook discussion on veteran suicide prevention awareness on Friday, February 19, at 10:30am on the DVS Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/nmdvshealthcare2015/>.

In this third installment of this discussion series, DVS Healthcare Division Director Jemia Warner will talk with New Mexico VA Health Care System (NMVAHCS) Suicide Prevention Case Manager CJ Fletcher, who will provide a veteran’s perspective of suicide awareness.

The two will also discuss the importance of engaging in mental health resources, and will have more

DVS Launches 1st Phase of Rural Veterans Transportation Program

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) has launched the *Rural Veterans Transportation Program* to help veterans get to and from their VA or VA-approved medical appointments.



DVS is collaborating with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) of New Mexico to begin this initial phase of this pilot program with service for veterans in Cibola, Colfax, Guadalupe, and Socorro counties.

DVS obtained funding for the program through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Highly Rural Transportation Grants Program. Grant funding is awarded to qualified organizations for providing transportation for veterans in highly rural areas who have difficulty getting VA health care due to the lack of transportation services. The VA, which defines a highly rural area as a county with less than seven people per square mile, provided DVS with a list of 16 qualifying New Mexico counties. The program launch begins with service to the previously mentioned four counties. Plans are being finalized to serve five additional counties to complete the first phase of this pilot program—with possible expansion to more counties in the future.

“Lack of transportation should not be a reason why a veteran isn’t receiving health care,” said DVS Secretary Sonya L. Smith. “We are excited to now be able to provide this critical transportation option for veterans who too often have had to neglect their health care needs simply because they live in very rural areas of our state.”

These free round-trip rides are only available for medical appointments at the Albuquerque Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center, and the following VA-managed Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC):

- Gallup • Raton • Taos • Española • Las Vegas • Clovis • Truth or Consequences

Transportation will also be provided to the Vet Centers in Farmington, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque...or to any VA preauthorized appointment at non-VA health care facilities. Drivers will be wearing protective face masks, and passengers will also be required to wear masks as well.

Reservations Are Required

Veterans must contact the DAV to make a round-trip reservation, and will be required to show proof of veteran status and a medical appointment upon pickup. Call Lupe Cruz at (505) 582-4544 to make a reservation, Monday- Friday from 9am-5pm. ***DVS cannot make reservations for any rides.***

Volunteers Needed

The DAV is also looking for volunteers to serve as drivers to these appointments, and to help identify veterans who would benefit from this program. Training will be provided for all volunteers, and drivers will be reimbursed for mileage.

For more non-reservation-related information about the DVS Rural Veterans Transportation, email DVS at NMDVS.healthcare@state.nm.us.

COVID-19 Vaccination Update

The New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) is leading the state of New Mexico's COVID-19 vaccination planning and implementation in close collaboration with other state agencies--as well as public, private and tribal partners throughout the state.

The following population segments are currently eligible for the vaccine:

- Hospital personnel
- Residents and staff of long-term care facilities
- Medical first responders
- Congregate setting workers
- Persons providing direct medical care and other in-person services
- Home-based health care and hospice workers
- People 75 years of age or older
- People 16 years of age or older at risk of COVID complications



Register for the COVID-19 Vaccine

DOH is urging all New Mexicans—including veterans—to register for the COVID-19 vaccine. Please use the following link: <https://cvvaccine.nmhealth.org/>. When a vaccine is available for you, DOH will send you a notification to schedule an appointment.

Users who have questions or would like support with the registration process – including New Mexicans who do not have internet access – can call toll-free 1-(855) 600-3453; press option “0” for vaccine questions, and then “4” for tech support.

For more information about New Mexico's statewide vaccination plan:

<https://cv.nmhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021.1.28-DOH-Phase-Guidance.pdf>

Please Take a Short Online Survey

DVS is asking veterans to take a short online survey to help the agency assess how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the state's veteran population. The results will help DVS gain a better understanding about how to enhance its services for veterans and their families during the pandemic.

No personal or confidential questions are asked.

The survey is found at the top of the DVS website homepage, at:
<http://www.nmdvs.org/covid-19-veterans-survey/>.



New Mexico VA Health Care System COVID-19 Vaccine Update

The New Mexico VA Health Care System (NMVAHCS) is currently offering COVID-19 vaccines in Albuquerque for veterans who are already registered with the VA and:

- are 65 years of age or older
- have selected high-risk health factors

The vaccine will be provided by appointment only at a drive through clinic at the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center. Vaccines will soon be offered at the 15 Community-Based Outpatient Clinics in the state. Veterans who meet the above requirements will be contacted by NMVAHCS to schedule a vaccination appointment. **Again, veterans must be registered with the VA health care system. No walk-up vaccines will be given.**

NMVAHCS will reach out to veterans using AudioCare, VEText and email. Not all veterans will be receiving messaging at the same time since communication will be sent out based on a tiered approach. For more information, go to <https://www.albuquerque.va.gov/services/covid-19-vaccines.asp>

Below is information about a non-COVID19 “drive-thru” respiratory clinic on the east side of the main hospital building...near the spinal cord injury clinic.

DRIVE- THRU RESPIRATORY CLINIC

**No Appointment Needed -
No COVID vaccines will be administered at this clinic, they will only check for symptoms**

All passengers must stay inside their vehicles from the arrival to departure. Staff will direct the traffic flow, obtain information, collect a brief medical history and preform the swab.

- *Flu Symptoms*
- *COVID- 19 Symptoms*
- *Cold Symptoms*

Mon. thru Fri. ~ 8am to 3:30pm

WWII Veteran Finally Receives His High School Diploma

It took 78 years, but World War II navy veteran Orlando S. Romero finally received his high school diploma on January 14 at a special ceremony in Albuquerque.

The 96-year old former Seaman 1st Class received his diploma through *Operation Recognition*, a program developed by DVS which allows veterans in New Mexico to receive their high school diploma if they left high school to serve in World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War.



World War II Veteran Orlando S. Romero receives his high school diploma on January 14 from Robert F. Kennedy Charter School. Presenting the diploma was school principal Shawn Morris. Mr. Romero dropped out of Albuquerque High School in 1943 when he was drafted for service in the U.S. Navy.



Mr. Romero was drafted shortly after he turned 18 in the middle of his senior year at Albuquerque High School in 1943. Upon returning home from the war, he immediately began looking for employment—working as a janitor, a furniture maker, and other jobs to support his family.

It wasn't until a few years ago that he learned about Operation Recognition providing veterans like him with their high school diploma, which was presented to him at a socially-distanced graduation ceremony in the gymnasium of Robert F. Kennedy Charter School.

Operation Recognition

Prior to the post-Vietnam War era, many young men in America cut short their high school education to serve in the military. Many, like Mr. Romero, were drafted as soon as they turned 18. Others enlisted—often lying about their age.

After the Vietnam War, graduating from high school or passing the General Education Development tests (GED) became a mandatory pre-requisite for military service.

DVS encourages any pre-Vietnam War era veteran who interrupted their high school education to contact DVS about filing the paperwork to receive their diplomas. For more information, please contact DVS State Benefits Bureau Chief Jeff George at jeff.george@state.nm.us or (505) 699-4087.

The Prominent Role African American Soldiers Played in the New Mexico's Military History



Non-commissioned officers from Troop L of the 9th Cavalry, or "Buffalo Soldiers," are shown at Ft. Wingate, N.M., in 1899. (Photo by Imperial Photo Gallery, courtesy of the Palace of the Governors Photo Archives, Neg. No. 098373).

February is Black History Month, a federally recognized celebration of the contributions and achievements of African Americans and a time for recognizing their central role in U.S. history.

African Americans have a long and distinguished history in the United States military. African Americans have defended our nation with loyalty, honor, and patriotism, during peace time and in every war fought by or within the United States.

Here in New Mexico, African American "Buffalo Soldiers" played a prominent role serving our country in pre-statehood New Mexico.

(the following text is courtesy of Tim Roberts and Scott Smith, Regional Managers of the Ft. Stanton and Lincoln Historic Sites)

During the late 19th-century a series of frontier forts dotted the New Mexican landscape, garrisoned by soldiers tasked with not only protecting citizens but also with assisting in the construction of roads, communication lines, and other infrastructure needed by the growing territory.

A significant number of these servicemen were African-American and between 1866 and 1900 these Buffalo Soldiers served at 11 of New Mexico's 16 frontier forts. Three of these former Army posts are currently preserved and interpreted by New Mexico Historic Sites; Fort Stanton, Fort Sumner and Fort Selden.

More than 175,000 African-American men served in segregated army units during the American Civil War. Beginning in 1866 the War Department began consolidating these regiments into peacetime units, eventually settling on two infantry regiments and two cavalry regiments. The origin of the term Buffalo Soldier is still debated by historians, but the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum asserts that Cheyenne warriors gave the name to members of the 10th Cavalry Regiment in reference to the troopers' physical appearance and fierce action during battles.

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The first Buffalo Soldiers to serve in New Mexico arrived in 1866 when members of the 57th and 125th Infantry Regiments camped at Fort Sumner while on route south to Forts Stanton and Selden.

Beginning in late 1875, the famed ninth Cavalry relocated their regimental headquarters to Fort Union, New Mexico. Members of the ninth Cavalry deployed to Forts Bayard, Craig, Cummings, McRae, Selden, Stanton, Tularosa and Wingate.

While in New Mexico men of the ninth Cavalry participated in campaigns against the Apache during “Victorio’s War” and assisted territorial officials during the violent frontier conflicts that erupted in Lincoln and Colfax counties. After the ninth Cavalry left New Mexico in 1881 no Buffalo Soldier regiments served in the territory until the 10th Cavalry moved to Fort Bayard in 1887. As the American Frontier began to close, The 24th Infantry served at Fort Bayard from 1888 to 1896, Fort Selden from 1888 to 1891, and at Fort Stanton for three months in 1896. The final Buffalo Soldiers to serve in the Land of Enchantment were members of the 25th Infantry Regiment and ninth Cavalry Regiment who were stationed at Forts Bayard and Wingate between 1898 and 1899.

Together with federally operated sites at Fort Bayard National Cemetery, Fort Craig National Historic Site and Fort Union National Monument—New Mexico Historic Sites plays an important role in preserving the history of the Buffalo Soldiers’ time in New Mexico.

Ft. Sumner Historic Site/Bosque Redondo Memorial

3647 Billy the Kid Dr,
Fort Sumner, NM 88119
(575) 355-2573

nmhistoricsites.org/bosque-redondo

Fort Sumner/Bosque Redondo is open 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.
Closed Mondays & Tuesdays. Admission is free.

Ft. Selden Historic Site

1280 Fort Selden Road
Radium Springs, NM 88054
(575) 526-8911

<http://www.nmhistoricsites.org/fort-selden>

Fort Selden is open 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.
Admission: \$5. Free to NM residents on the first Sunday of each month.

Children 16 and under are always admitted free. Wednesday free to New Mexico Seniors with ID.

Ft. Stanton Historic Site

Capitan, NM

Take Hwy 380 south of Capitan, making a left/head east on Hwy 220
(575) 354-0341

<http://www.nmhistoricsites.org/fort-stanton>

The grounds at Fort Stanton are open daily from 8 a.m.–5 pm.
The Museum is open daily from 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Admission is free.

Veterans Community Bulletin Board

NOTICE: The following pages feature informational and event flyers provided to DVS by veterans and community service agencies. These flyers are published for the convenience of New Mexico's veteran community. Inclusion in The Guardian does not constitute an endorsement by DVS of the organization, content, products, or services contained therein.

DVS invites service agencies and non-profit service organizations to send flyers or news releases announcing an upcoming or ongoing veteran-related event. DVS will post these flyers as a public service courtesy to the veteran community. However:

- Flyers must have the name of a point-of-contact from the organization...along with the contact's phone number or email address. Flyers without this information will not be published.
- DVS is not responsible for the accuracy of the content, products, or services in these flyers.
- Views expressed in these flyers are the independent views of the authors/owners of the third-party entity that created the flyer—and does not necessarily reflect the views of DVS.
- To the maximum extent permitted by law, DVS expressly denies liability for any and all losses suffered by any persons or organizations who, in their independent discretion and reliance, either directly or indirectly rely on content, products, services or information offered by these independent third-party organizations.
- DVS reserves the right to edit or decline publishing of any flyer.



Emergency Assistance Offered by Salvation Army Albuquerque

Salvation Army Albuquerque is offering the following assistance to veterans and non-veterans in the Albuquerque metro area.

Food Pantry: Monday – Friday 9am – 11:30 am and 1 pm – 3:30 pm
Salvation Army Corps Community Center – Family Services – 4301 Bryn Mawr Dr NE distributes food to those having difficulty purchasing enough to avoid hunger.

Food Boxes feed families for up to a week. Also, Homeless are provided bags of single serving foods and drinks as funding and food are available.

Criteria needed:

- ID's for everyone in household (so we make sure to provide enough food)
- Proof of residence (other than ID, like a bill or rental agreement)

Bus Passes – Low Cost:

Salvation Army Corps Community Center – Family Services – 4301 Bryn Mawr Dr NE
Monday – Friday 9am – 11:30am and 1:00 – 3:30 pm
provides Bus Passes at a discounted rate (\$10.00 monthly pass)

Criteria needed:

- ID
- \$10 (under ER conditions, a first-time pass may be given free of charge)

Rent and Mortgage Eviction Prevention Assistance:

(for as long as funding lasts)

Monday – Friday 9am – 11:30 am and 1:00 pm – 3:30 pm

Salvation Army Corps Community Center – Family Services – 4301 Bryn Mawr Dr NE helps provide Assistance in preventing Eviction. One-month Base Rent with a 3 day Pay or Quit notice. Assistance is paid directly to Landlord (NO deposits or fees may be paid) as funding permits. One time annually with Emergency

Criteria Needed:

- ID's for everyone in Household.
- Proof of Residence
 - Current Rental or Lease Agreement; or last 2 Mortgage statements.
- 3 Day Pay or Quit Notice
 - Proof of Income for everyone in Household
 - Proof of Emergency – reason funding needed

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Utility Payment Assistance:

Monday – Friday: 9:00 am – 11:30 am and 1:pm – 3:30- pm

Salvation Army Corps Community Center – 4301 Bryn Mawr Dr. NE assists eligible households in paying for Gas, Propane, Electricity and Water. Available 1 time annually for each. No deposits or fees can be provided.

Criteria needed:

- ID's for everyone in Household
- LIHEAP letter of acceptance
- Proof of Residence (can be with bill)
- 2 months of current/previous bill
- Proof of Emergency need

Emotional Spiritual Care:

Provided by Ordained ministers of Salvation Army by appointment.

(505) 544-5832 or (505) 544-5833

Soup Kitchen / Free Meals:

Tuesday – Friday: 8:00 am – 3:00 pm

Salvation Army Temple Corps located at 501 Broadway Blvd SE 87102, offers on-site prepared meals to food-insecure individuals. Also, when available: snacks, water, Bibles, coffee, masks, clothing, shoes

Residential Substance Abuse Treatment: Adult (Male) Rehabilitation Program

Salvation Army Corps Community Center - 400 John St. SE, ABQ offers a 6-month residential treatment program for adult males. The program is a faith-based, work therapy program. Offered free for males with life-controlling addictions.

Phone number for Intake or information: (505) 242-3112

Silvercrest Low Income Senior Housing:

Salvation Army Silvercrest offers independent living community for low-income senior citizens. Located at 4400 Pan American FWY NE in ABQ, Silvercrest fills a critical need of Safe Housing for Senior. Application Process and Waiting List

(505) 883-1068

Additional assistance for Albuquerque metro area residents in need...



CDBG-CV Eviction Prevention Program

The CDBG-CV Eviction Prevention Program (CDBG-CV EPP) is funded through the U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES). Recipients of HUD assistance may not simultaneously participate in one or more HUD programs; Affordable Housing Properties are permitted providing the rental unit is not HUD subsidized. In order to qualify for CDBG-CV assistance, client households must meet the following eligibility requirements:

Program Eligibility Requirements

- COVID-19: Applicant must self-certify that they, or members of their household, have been financially impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Income Guidelines: Applicant’s household income must be at or below 80% of the area median income (AMI) for Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, New Mexico;

US Department of HUD 2020 Adjusted Home Income Limits
 State: New Mexico Area Median Income: \$69,100

Effective Date: July 1, 2020	Program %	1 Person	2 Person	3 Person	4 Person	5 Person	6 Person	7 Person	8 Person
Albuquerque, NM MSA	30%	\$14,550	\$16,600	\$18,700	\$20,750	\$22,450	\$24,100	\$25,750	\$27,400
	60%	\$29,040	\$33,180	\$37,320	\$41,460	\$44,820	\$48,120	\$51,420	\$54,780
	80%	\$38,750	\$44,250	\$49,800	\$55,300	\$59,750	\$64,150	\$68,600	\$73,000

- Proof of Income: Current or previous year (2020 or 2019) IRS Form 1040, U.S Individual Income Tax Return for each adult household member who receives income;
- Identification: Valid US Government Issued Picture ID;
- Service Specific Requirements:
 - Utility Assistance
 - Past-due or disconnected status - Account must be in a household member’s name who resides on the property and is a responsible party on the mortgage or rental contract. A recent bill and statement of account will be requested.
 - Proof of Address – Valid Rental Contract/Agreement/Mortgage Statement or other Ownership documentation - must contain applicant’s name and address.

Continued from previous page...

- Household member name must also be on the tax form(s), and on the rental contract, if applicable. Exception: Water accounts paid by tenant as stipulated in lease.

Rental Assistance:

- Valid Lease Agreement or Rental Contract– must contain applicant’s name and address;
- Current month eviction notice, notice of non-payment, Writ of Restitution, or account statement showing a past-due account. Document(s) must be in a household member’s name who resides on the property.
- Household member name must also be on the tax form(s), and on the rental contract;
- Ownership of property must be verifiable.

The New Mexico Workers’ Compensation Administration is Looking to Fill I-T Vacancies



The New Mexico Workers’ Compensation Administration—the state agency that oversees deliveries of benefits to workers injured on the job—currently has three open positions on its Information Technology team. One is a network administrator position; two are for application developers (senior and mid-level). More about each position is listed below. *Qualified veterans are strongly encouraged to apply.* For more specifics and links to apply, visit the WCA's jobs page: <https://workerscomp.nm.gov/WCA-Jobs>

IT Network Administrator II (WCA # 21633)

This position will provide day-to-day on-site advanced network security for agency users and develop and maintain the agency's security plan to minimize compromise of the agency's data. Managing, monitoring and securing the agency's network infrastructure; managing network security tools; configuring and maintaining the organization's internal computer network; identifying, troubleshooting, solving and documenting network connectivity and performance issues.

Must also participate in training agency users on third-party applications such as Microsoft Word, Excel and Outlook; providing security training for agency users; providing end-user desktop support and maintenance of servers and other networked devices.

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IT Application Developer III (WCA # 22024)

This position acts as the lead on the complex assignment requiring the development of new and improved applications, maintenance of the existing applications, and contributes to all the phases of a project.

The position will be heavily involved in implementing a new business case management system; designing and programming applications using Console, Win Forms, and Web Applications in the .NET framework (C # or VB); making complex configurations/modifications to existing applications, managing all aspects of the system/product to include, and not limited to installation, backup, data recovery, security, clustering, and establishing system utilization standards; creating interfaces and queries to retrieve information from databases in MS SQL; implementing and deploying applications that meet user specifications.

Must collaborate with developers and other IT staff; participate in development of program designs, user interfaces and test procedures; produce technical documentation that accurately and thoroughly depicts software design and code base. Must contribute to writing user guides and training documentation; training new users and providing customer service; leading lower level team members and mentoring application developers; developing reports and presentations to senior management as needed.



IT Application Developer II (WCA # 61555)

The position is responsible for the full development of new and existing software projects at the WCA. In addition to programming responsibilities, the main tasks include design, analysis of requirements, test, deployment, and maintenance. The developer also works in collaboration with stakeholders to fulfill projects and agency's goals.

Performing the System Develop Life Cycle (SDLC) processes for planning, gathering requirements, designing, creating, testing and deploying applications; designing and programming applications using Console, Win Forms, and Web Applications in the .NET framework (C# or VB); creating interfaces and queries to retrieve information from databases MS SQL; providing technical proficiency in specific areas of development technologies: .NET, MS SQL Server, T-SQL, XML, MVC, LINQ, JavaScript, customer facing portals, reporting, and analytics; implementing and deploying applications that meet stakeholders specifications on schedule.

Must collaborate with developers and other IT staff to set specifications for new applications, and participate in the development of program designs, user interfaces and test procedures; producing technical documentation that accurately and thoroughly depicts the software design and code base. Participate in writing application solutions that include test plans and application guides; training users in new software applications and providing customer service.

ATTENTION VETERANS!

Are you interested in
becoming a U.S. Citizen?



Do you have:

- An Honorable or General Under Honorable Conditions Discharge?
- A copy of your DD-214?

**Then you may qualify for our
Veterans Naturalization Assistance Program**

**It's free to apply for your naturalization
as a U.S. Military veteran.**

**You may be eligible to apply for
naturalization under special provisions.**



**The Veterans
Consortium**

VETERANS NATURALIZATION
ASSISTANCE PROJECTSM

If you or a veteran you know may qualify, please contact
Nicelle Godfrey at (202) 733-3337 or vnap@vetsprobono.org



News from the VA



Denis McDonough
U.S. Department of
Veterans Affairs Secretary

Denis McDonough Confirmed as VA Secretary

Denis McDonough was confirmed with an 87-7 vote in the U.S. Senate on February 8 as secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Secretary McDonough served as former President Barack Obama's chief of staff. He will oversee the nation's second largest federal agency that serves our nation's 19 million veterans. Though Secretary McDonough never served in the armed forces—fact noted by several veterans advocacy groups—he touted his experience working in the Obama administration, telling lawmakers he understood how to untangle and solve complex challenges across the government. He said his experience as chief of staff also enabled him to view the sacrifices that veterans make and that he feels he owes a profound debt of gratitude to those who served in the military.

The 51-year old native of Stillwater, MN, graduated from Saint John's University in nearby Collegeville with a Bachelor of Arts, summa cum laude, in history and Spanish in 1992. Four years later, he earned an MFFS degree at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service.

From 1996 to 1999, Mr. McDonough worked as an aide for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, where he focused on Latin America. In 2008 he was selected by President Obama as senior foreign policy advisory, and as the National Security Council's head of strategic communication. He then served as National Security Council Chief of Staff.

In October, 2010, President Obama named Mr. McDonough as Deputy National Security Advisor, before being named chief of staff in 2013—where he served for the remainder of President Obama's presidency.

Mr. McDonough then worked in the private sector, focusing on transforming what he called "...segments of an outdated labor market, to reflect the needs of the digital economy, boost employment opportunities, and expand job training for Americans."

Statement from VA Secretary McDonough

As I begin my tenure at the Department of Veterans Affairs, I want to take a moment to speak directly to veterans and other VA stakeholders and share my thoughts on VA's mission and the road ahead.

It is the honor of my lifetime to join the VA workforce in serving veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors. We live in peace and security today because of the sacrifices of generations of veterans. My career has afforded me a privilege available to relatively few Americans: to see up close the excellence of our Armed Forces in the field on my regular visits to Afghanistan and Iraq; to witness the strength and resilience of our wounded warriors at Walter Reed; and to experience the unimaginable grief of military families there at Dover Air Force Base when our fallen heroes come home one final time. *(continued)*

From that I have a passion to fight relentlessly every day to ensure that VA serves our veterans as well as they have served America. Throughout those experiences I've also been deeply impressed by the dedication and excellence of VA employees. I look forward to being a true partner with the men and women of VA – dedicated, highly-skilled professionals, many veterans themselves – veterans serving veterans who deserve our profound respect and support.

At this moment when our country must come together, caring for you—our country's veterans and your Families—is a mission that can unite us all. The president has called on every American to embrace our responsibility to support our veterans and their families. So this administration will work with other federal departments and agencies, with veterans service organizations, with the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA), and with other state and local organizations, both public and private, who have the best interests of veterans and their families at heart. We must work together to serve all veterans.

President Biden has defined our country's most sacred obligation as preparing and equipping the troops we send into harm's way and then caring for them and their families when they return. Here's how we at VA will fulfill our part of that sacred obligation. Every decision I make will be determined by a simple principle, that it increases veterans' access to care and benefits and improves outcomes for them.

Our highest priorities will be VA's three core responsibilities: Providing all our veterans timely, world-class health care; ensuring they and their families have access to the benefits they've earned; and honoring our veterans with a final resting place that's a lasting tribute to their service. In addition, we'll do everything in our power to help veterans get through this pandemic; help them build civilian lives through education and jobs worthy of their skills and service; ensure that VA welcomes *all* veterans, including women, veterans of color and LGBTQ veterans; work to eliminate veterans' homelessness and reduce suicide; and keep faith with their families and caregivers.

Assessments of our efforts will be measured by the outcomes we generate for veterans and by listening to what veterans have to say about their experiences. We will be strengthened by the advice and support of veterans service organizations and by hearing from our partners and respected organizations who share our mission of improving veterans' lives.

We're going to focus on living our core VA I-CARE values in all our interactions. Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence – these values will define who we are, our culture, and how we care for veterans and other VA colleagues. This means that all VA patients, staff, their families, caregivers, survivors, visitors and advocates must feel safe in a workplace free of harassment and discrimination. I will not accept discrimination, harassment or assault at any level or at any facility within VA. We will provide a safe, inclusive environment for veterans and VA employees. Simultaneously, in VHA and VBA, we will redouble our efforts to care for veterans who are survivors of military sexual trauma, ensuring they can all count on VA's support. We can achieve our mission only by embracing the incredible diversity that defines our veteran population and all of America, leveraging everyone's talents and passions. I commit to these principles, and I will make sure that my senior leadership team reflects and embeds them in everything we do.

We are fortunate to have a strong ally and leader in the White House. President Biden gave me a clear mission – to be a fierce, staunch advocate for veterans and their families. His marching order to me is clear – fight like hell for veterans. And we *are going to* fight like hell to give our veterans and their families the benefits, services, respect and dignity they deserve. I fully embrace this mission, and I know the VA work



February is American Heart Month

The VA believes quality of care for veterans includes raising awareness around important health topics. By highlighting some of the national health awareness campaigns each month, veterans can get ideas, information, and resources on a variety of health matters.

February is American Heart Month, and the VA would like to educate veterans about the conditions that may lead to the development of cardiovascular disease--and how to avoid potential heart problems.

Cardiovascular disease--or heart disease--is the leading cause of death for adults in America. Heart disease includes a range of conditions--many of which are related to atherosclerosis. This condition is caused when plaque, or fatty material in the bloodstream, builds up in the walls of arteries. Plaque buildup essentially makes the arteries smaller, which in turn decreases blood flow.

A heart attack happens when the blood flow to a part of the heart is blocked by a blood clot. If this clot cuts off the blood flow completely, the part of the heart muscle supplied by that artery begins to die. Depending on the damage, your doctor may prescribe medicine to and recommend lifestyle changes.

A stroke happens when a blood vessel that feeds the brain with oxygenated blood is blocked by a blood clot. Strokes can also occur when a blood vessel within the brain bursts. When the blood supply to the brain is cut off, brain cells begin to die. A stroke can be fatal. Those who survive, however, often find themselves without the ability to perform any number of motor-skill or muscular functions such as the ability to speak or walk, partial paralysis, or breathe without mechanical assistance.

Risk Factors for Heart Disease

The most common risk factors that may increase your chance of developing cardiovascular disease include:

- A family history of heart disease
- Unhealthy cholesterol Levels
- Smoking
- Hypertension (High blood pressure)
- Diabetes
- Excess Weight

Common Symptoms

The most common symptoms of heart disease are:

- Chest pain/chest discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Rapid or irregular pulse
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Pain, numbness, weakness or coldness in your legs or arms, neck, or jaw

People often mistake heart pain with indigestion or heartburn. That's why it's important to seek medical attention if you think you may be suffering from a serious heart condition.

Exercising, a healthy diet, not smoking, lowering your cholesterol level, controlling high blood pressure, and maintaining a healthy weight can reduce your risks of heart disease. The VA urges you to talk to your health care provider to discuss what you can do to avoid heart related problems.